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OPERATIONAL ART IN LIMITED WAR TERMINATION:  
THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL LEVELS OF WAR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## **Abstract of**

### **OPERATIONAL ART IN LIMITED WAR TERMINATION: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL LEVELS OF WAR**

The effective application of operational art is critical to the successful termination of a limited war by the United States. Despite this critical role, guidance regarding the application of operational art to war termination in a limited war is meager and often conflicting.

This paper focuses on the high-level bridge between the strategic and operational levels of war that is necessary to achieve successful war termination. Theoretical synopses regarding the unique characteristics of limited war, war termination theory, and negotiating theory are provided. Practical issues/steps regarding the bridge from the strategic to the operational level of war are explored based upon the noted theories. The validity of the practical thought developed in the paper is tested through an examination of war termination in the Korean War.

Based upon arguments in the paper, it is clear that successful war termination in a limited war cannot be achieved without the effective application of operational art at the strategic/operational level of war. It is also clear that the operational commander is uniquely positioned to review the ability of the military instrument to deliver the political object. Recommendations entail an expansion of doctrine to include a broader discussion of war termination issues.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The effective application of operational art is critical to the successful termination of a limited war by the United States. This paper provides evidence to support that thesis, and also provides both a theoretical and practical war termination framework that should prove helpful to an operational commander. For the purpose of this paper, successful war termination refers to how wars are ended in a manner that achieves desired political objectives. Operational art, as used in this paper, refers only to the high-level bridge between strategy and the operational level of war; the link between the operational level of war and tactics is not addressed.

Given the recent emergence of the United States as the world's sole military/economic superpower, the probability of engagement in an unlimited war (for the United States) has been dramatically reduced. Consequently, strategic and operational thought regarding limited warfare must be further refined since this type of war is now clearly the principal means of employing military resources to achieve national strategic objectives.

Given the Clausewitzian premise that war is "a continuation of political activity by other means"<sup>1</sup>, it is imperative that the military instrument be properly applied in order to achieve the political objective through successful war termination. Due to his role as a bridge between the strategic and operational levels of war, the operational commander (generally the regional CINC)

is uniquely positioned to facilitate favorable war termination through effective application of operational art.

Despite this critical role, guidance regarding the application of operational art to war termination in a limited war is meager at best and often conflicting. Joint Pub 3-0 (Doctrine for Joint Operations) recognizes that operational commanders must consider "what military (or related political and social) conditions must be produced...to achieve the strategic goal."<sup>2</sup> However, Joint Pub 3-0 provides very little guidance regarding exactly how to achieve this result. Joint Pub 1 (Joint Warfare of the U.S. Armed Forces) completely fails to address war termination, and U.S. Army Doctrine states that "the ultimate purpose of war is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and will to fight"<sup>3</sup>...a goal not always appropriate during limited wars.

In light of the above, this paper provides a theoretical and practical framework regarding the application of operational art in order to achieve successful war termination in a limited war. Chapters 2-4 provide theoretical synopses regarding the definition of a limited war, war termination theory, and negotiating theory respectively. Chapter 5 provides practical thought that should prove helpful to the operational commander while attempting to terminate a limited war. Chapter 6 analyzes termination in the Korean War in light of the thought presented in this paper, and Chapter 7 provides conclusions and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LIMITED WARS**

As an economic and political superpower, the United States will continue to pursue issues of national interest around the world. It is further reasonable to presume that the actual use of military means in limited wars will occasionally be necessary to achieve political goals in the current world environment. Consequently, a review of the unique characteristics of limited wars is imperative if effective war termination is to be achieved. Several factors which make limited wars distinct relative to unlimited wars are as follows.

**LIMITED OBJECTIVES:** Unlike unlimited wars where destruction/total defeat of the enemy presents a clearcut political objective that is understood by all significant participants (political and military leaders, plus the people), a distinct political objective is oftentimes difficult to identify in limited wars. For instance, the political objective in a limited war may be as nebulous as changing the enemy's behavior versus the more quantifiable territorial and/or total defeat goals that exist in unlimited wars.<sup>4</sup> In addition, because they are often nebulous, political objectives in limited wars are subject to alteration due to diplomatic activity and/or battlefield success/failure. Finally, the achievement of political objectives in a limited war (for the United States) can

be made even more difficult if the war is seen as unlimited by one of our allies or our enemy.

**LIMITED MEANS:** Clausewitz states that "the political object...will thus determine both the military objective...and the amount of effort it requires."<sup>5</sup> This premise is reasonably expandable to include "the political object will determine the level of resources and degree of constraints" provided to and imposed upon the operational commander. In essence, during a limited war, it should be presumed that resources (human and economic) will be finite and that political constraints upon military activity (for example target selection) will be restrictive.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF WILL:** The importance of maintaining the cohesiveness of the Clausewitzian Triangle within the United States cannot be overemphasized during a limited war. Clausewitz argues that peace can be achieved by wearing down the enemy.<sup>6</sup> This argument applies to the people element of the Triangle as well as to the military, and is particularly germane in a limited war where difficulties exist in communicating the importance of the political objective relative to the costs (human and economic) involved. In addition, these difficulties will be exacerbated in the United States due to an active media, the



presence of opposition political parties and an independent public that is generally reluctant to accept sacrifices over the long-term (particularly when the objective is not clearly vital). These factors make manipulation of the people leg of the Triangle within the United States a viable strategy for the enemy, particularly when that enemy is an authoritarian regime (the most likely opponent in a limited war) that doesn't have the media, political opposition and public scrutiny that exist in this country.

**THE POST-WAR ENVIRONMENT:** As noted, in an unlimited war, the destruction of the enemy (total defeat) is almost universally accepted as the political object. Consequently, the destruction of the enemy's military and political viability is a reasonable means of achieving the political goal, with the details regarding the post-war balance of power dictated by the victor after the fact. However, in a limited war, the post-war landscape must be shaped prior to and during war termination since the opposing government will generally not be eliminated. Consequently, questions regarding post-war relative strength in-theater must be addressed upfront rather than after the fact in a limited war. This issue severely compounds the difficulties faced by the operational commander when attempting to terminate a limited war since the post-war environment must be shaped while conducting the current campaign.

## CHAPTER 3

### WAR TERMINATION THEORY

Previous chapters noted the Clausewitzian theory that war is a continuation of political activity by other means. In addition, it has been argued that it is reasonable to presume that the United States, as the world's pre-eminent superpower, will occasionally use military force in a limited war scenario to pursue national political objectives.

Given this environment, the logical question then becomes...How will such wars end? As articulated by Fred Ikle, "for any war effort...that is supposed to serve long-term national objectives, the most essential question is how the enemy might be forced to surrender, or failing that, what sort of bargain might be struck with him to terminate the war."<sup>7</sup> Since this paper is concerned with limited war, the latter scenario (what sort of bargain might be struck) is the most germane. In addition to simply terminating the war, Ikle implies that a Nation prefers to terminate the war having achieved both its short (the original political goals) and long-term (post-war balance of power) interests.

Since the operational commander impacts all aspects of the in-theater war effort (including termination), it is important to review theoretical aspects in order to provide insight on how the termination effort can be favorably influenced. The two most prominent theories are reviewed below.

**THE RATIONAL CALCULUS OF WAR:** This theory presumes that nations fight wars in pursuit of post-war objectives whose benefits exceed the cost of attainment. Costs and benefits are weighed throughout the war effort and "once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow."<sup>8</sup> This theory presumes that opposing combatants have one identifiable decision making center; know precisely what they and their enemy are attempting to accomplish; have all available information; and can identify and compare the costs of available courses of action.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty with the rational theory is that it is based on presumptions that are unrealistic due to several reasons. First, the level of information required is exhaustive and simply unobtainable. Second, even if complete information were available, the ability to measure costs vs. benefits in an objective manner simply does not exist. Third, the rational theory completely omits the passions/politics of the human element (political and military leaders) in examining/adjusting existing policies and in analyzing available data (different people will draw different conclusions from the same data).<sup>10</sup>

**NONRATIONAL THEORY:** This theory argues that the policy for continuing/terminating a war is shaped by competition between individuals and agencies who are pursuing their own interests rather than the rational interests of the Nation as a whole.

Given this lack of a rationally determined national objective, effort becomes primarily focused on the means of conducting the war (political advantages gained, territory captured, enemy killed) versus the goal of favorable war termination in order to achieve the political objective.<sup>11</sup>

**THE REAL WORLD:** Fred Ikle argues in "Every War Must End" that reality is principally a mixture of the two theories discussed above. In essence, national leaders are guided by a concept of national interest. However, this concept is impacted by personal considerations, motivations and experiences.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, various national leaders will have different perceptions regarding the rational status of the military/political situation at any given time. This difference in perceptions will be magnified by cultural differences that exist between the United States and an enemy; consequently, it is very conceivable (and, in fact, probable) that an enemy will perceive the military situation in a starkly different context than that perceived by our own political and military leaders.

## CHAPTER 4

### NEGOTIATING THEORY

The operational commander must also have a clear understanding of the factors that influence negotiations that ultimately lead to war termination. The understanding of these two theories, war termination and negotiating, will provide the background necessary for the effective application of the military instrument in order to achieve successful war termination in a limited war.

Although limited wars can occasionally be terminated without negotiations (such as when one side becomes clearly dominant, achieves its objectives - usually territory - and ceases hostilities), limited wars typically involve a negotiated settlement. During a limited war, an enemy will generally be amenable to negotiations if his original objectives are no longer attainable through the use of military force or if the costs of obtaining his objectives begin to outweigh their benefits.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, an enemy's willingness to seriously negotiate will be influenced by his perception of the probability of future success. Even if the current military situation is unfavorable, an enemy will be reluctant to modify political goals if he perceives that his relative military position will improve in the future. Consequently, an operational commander must use the military instrument to leverage his Nation's negotiating position by convincing the enemy that his (the enemy's) objectives are

unattainable or too costly to achieve, both now and in the future. In addition, as discussed, the operational commander must take into account that the enemy's perception will be influenced not only by a rational calculus of war, but also by nonrational factors such as national pride, domestic politics, and the lack of objective measures of benefits/costs.

Once negotiations start, several unique dangers arise that can affect military operations in-theater and, as such, should be recognized and managed as well as possible by the operational commander. There are four such dangers. First, is the possibility that negotiations themselves can be used to impact the military balance of power.<sup>14</sup> This phenomena will occur if the enemy is given time to rebuild due to a temporary cease fire or cessation of offensive military operations by the United States. Second, is the possibility that negotiations will adversely affect the psychological balance of power. In essence, an erosion of "national will" can occur in both military personnel within theater and the civilian population at large if early expectations of quick termination remain unfulfilled as negotiations drag out. Third, is the potential that a willingness to negotiate will communicate a perception of weakness, thus enhancing the enemy's resolve. The fourth possibility is that the political demands made during negotiations will seem so severe that the enemy's willingness to conclusively bargain will be eroded, thus actually increasing the enemy's willingness to continue fighting.<sup>15</sup>

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **OPERATIONAL ART:**

#### **THE APPLICATION OF THE MILITARY INSTRUMENT**

Previous chapters have provided a theoretical overview that is germane to war termination during a limited war. This chapter provides practical thought/actions which should prove helpful to an operational commander in applying operational art in order to achieve war termination on favorable terms.

**THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT:** As discussed in previous chapters, the operational commander's strategic environment is extremely complex in a limited war. Consequently, an understanding of that environment is critical to the appropriate application of the military instrument if successful war termination is to be achieved. The most important points include the following:

- \* The political objective will often be unclear since it will entail less than complete surrender of the enemy.

- \* The political objective will be subject to change as diplomatic and military activities alter the perceptions of politicians (own country, allies and enemy).

- \* "National will" can be a factor which often works against the United States whose direct physical security will rarely be directly threatened during a limited war.

- \* The shaping of the post-war environment is a major

consideration when developing termination strategies.

\* The enemy's willingness to negotiate (and ultimately accept agreeable termination conditions) will not only be impacted by the current military situation, but will also be significantly impacted by perceptions of future diplomatic and military success/failure.

**STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT:** An initial strategic assesment, conducted by the operational commander, that relates military capabilities to political objectives is absolutely essential to successful war termination. There are five major factors to consider.

The first factor is the clear understanding of political objectives. Clausewitz argues that the military commander should ideally be a part of the Cabinet to ensure that political objectives are understood and can be addressed by the military instrument.<sup>16</sup> This option is not available to the operational commander (generally the regional CINC) given the governmental structure in the United States. However, it is imperative that the operational commander clearly understand the political objective(s). If this understanding is lacking, the misapplication of the military instrument is almost certain to follow with dire political and military consequences resulting.<sup>17</sup>

The second factor is the ability of the military instrument to achieve stated political objective(s) given the resource and political constraints that will apply during a limited war.<sup>18</sup>



This issue is often overlooked as both politicians and military leaders focus on the means of conducting war versus the larger strategic question of whether the military instrument can, in fact, deliver the political objective. The Vietnam War provides an example of military activity being so constrained (no invasion of North Vietnam and no bombing of sanctuaries for much of the war) that the political goal (of retaining an independent South Vietnam) was virtually impossible to achieve from the start. When this situation occurs (or a situation where resources provided appear insufficient), the operational commander must advise political leaders upfront that the ability of the military instrument to deliver the political objective is suspect.

The third factor is the focus of the military instrument in a manner that will achieve the political objective. Traditional military thinking has often focused on battlefield victory with minimal attention to achievement of the political end.<sup>19</sup> According to Ikle, "a battle won should count on the plus side only if it fits into a larger design for ending the war on favorable terms; otherwise it might have as disastrous consequences for the winner as did the battle the Japanese won at Pearl Harbor."<sup>20</sup> In essence, the military instrument must be applied as a coercive lever to achieve political ends, not simply as a means to defeat the enemy's armed forces.

The fourth factor is the shaping of the post-war environment.<sup>21</sup> Limited wars generally do not entail the elimination of the enemy's government. Consequently, an

important issue to be addressed in shaping the post-war environment is the desired condition of the enemy's military capability. This issue will be largely influenced by the tradeoff between achieving political objectives in the ongoing conflict (which will frequently entail greater destruction of the enemy's military) versus concerns regarding the maintenance of a regional balance of power after hostilities cease. There is no clearly defined solution to this issue; it will vary depending on the situation. However, the issue must be considered prior to the development of strategic and operational objectives.

The fifth factor is the impact of the designed military campaign on the national will of the major combatants. In essence, the CINC must consider, upfront, the impact of the planned operational campaign on the willingness of the American people to support the military effort over the duration of the war. This willingness will be affected by casualties, the duration of the military effort, media scrutiny, and criticism by the opposition political party. In addition, the enemy's ability to control the people leg of his own Clausewitzian Triangle should be assessed; particular attention must be focused on the ability of the enemy's leadership to exert control over its population due to the lack of a free press and political opposition. Once again, it is impossible to apply a standard evaluation technique when performing this assessment. However, the issue must be considered since its impact on the long-term ability of the operational commander to apply the military

instrument may be significant.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:** A Strategic Assessment (discussed above) conducted by the operational commander will provide insight into whether the military instrument can reasonably achieve the political objective(s). Presuming there is a reasonable opportunity for success, operational art must be applied in a manner that will convince the enemy to negotiate and, ultimately, to change behavior (military activity) and/or political objectives so that the political goals of the United States can be accommodated.

The concept of the center of gravity is critical to the development of the operational commander's strategic objectives. As described by Clausewitz, the center of gravity is "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point which all our energies should be directed."<sup>22</sup> In an unlimited war, destruction of the enemy's center of gravity will generally focus on the enemy's military since total defeat is, by definition, the political goal. However, limited wars present several unique issues that must be addressed when analyzing the enemy's Clausewitzian Triangle.

The initial issue is that the destruction of the enemy's government is frequently not the political objective in a limited war. The three major limited wars in which the United States has been involved since World War II demonstrate this dilemma. In the Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars the stated political

objective was always less than the elimination of the opposition government (all 3 wars were essentially focused on territory and/or restoring the status quo ante bellum). Consequently, the military instrument must be directed at convincing the enemy to alter behavior and/or political objectives rather than at the elimination of the government itself.

The second issue entails the difficulties that exist in destroying the enemy's military. This difficulty results from a combination of the limited means available to conduct a limited war, the political constraints applied which limit the operational commander's military options (territorial constraints on the conduct of the war such as occurred in Korea and Vietnam) and the desire to shape the post-war environment which can entail maintaining the enemy's long-term military viability to ensure a post-war regional balance of power. Consequently, destruction of the enemy's military is a valid center of gravity during a limited war only if existing and post-conflict political conditions can accommodate such an objective, and that accommodation is not always the case.

The third difficulty is that the people leg of the Triangle is often difficult to manipulate if the enemy's regime is authoritative. The Korean and Vietnam Wars provide examples of how authoritative regimes were willing to permit long-term suffering by their people while public pressure in the United States called for reduced military activity and a quick settlement.<sup>23</sup>

In light of the above, it is clear that the operational commander is confronted with difficult strategic choices from the outset regarding the element(s) of the enemy's Clausewitzian Triangle to which the military instrument should be applied. Considerations by the operational commander when developing strategic objectives should be strongly influenced by the following:

- \* The ultimate goal of the strategic military objective is to achieve the political objective.

- \* The destruction of the enemy's armed forces is a very reasonable means of achieving the political end since it would entail the elimination of a leg of his Clausewitzian Triangle. This strategic objective is congruent with current military doctrine (see footnote 3). However, the operational commander must prevent the destruction of the enemy's armed forces from unintentionally evolving into the principal objective of the military instrument. As noted, battlefield victory is not the principal goal, but only a means to influence the enemy's willingness to negotiate and, ultimately, to coerce a change in behavior and/or political objectives.

- \* The destruction of the enemy's armed forces is not always possible due to political concerns/constraints. If this is the case, the military instrument must be strategically focused on weakening the government and/or the people legs of the enemy's Triangle.

\* In sum,

in war many roads lead to success, and they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat. They range from the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose...Any one of these may be used to overcome the enemy's will: the choice depends on the circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

This counsel from Clausewitz is particularly germane when developing the strategic military objective during a limited war, and provides a warning regarding the tendency of the military means -(defeat the enemy on the battlefield) to evolve into an end in and of itself.

**OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES:** The previous section discussed the importance of developing realistic military strategic objectives in order to achieve the higher level political objective. In essence, the above section explored which element(s) of the enemy's Clausewitzian Triangle will be targeted by the military instrument. At this point, the military instrument must be applied against the enemy's strategic vulnerabilities in order to coerce the enemy to negotiate and, ultimately, to accommodate the political objectives of the United States. There are several aspects of war termination and negotiating theory that will prove beneficial to the operational commander as he applies the military instrument. These are as follows:

\* War termination theory suggests that when costs outweigh benefits, military activity should rationally cease and peace should follow. However, in a limited war, costs and benefits are

often very difficult to rationally measure and, consequently, perceptions will be critical during war termination negotiations.

- \* The enemy's willingness to negotiate and change political demands will be influenced, not just by the present, but by a perception of the future.

- \* Negotiations themselves can be used as an instrument of war. Specific threats include a lull in military activity as negotiations proceed (which allows the enemy time to rebuild) and the ability of the enemy to manipulate the people element of the United States' Triangle during negotiations.

In light of the above, operational objectives in a limited war must address both the enemy's means to fight (the present), as well as his will to continue the fight into the future. In addition, as discussed in the previous section (Strategic Objectives), the most vulnerable leg(s) of the enemy's Clausewitzian Triangle must be the focus of operational objectives. Given this environment, there are several factors that should further influence the development/execution of operational objectives in a limited war.

The first factor is that operational objectives must be developed in order to make the relative cost of continued disagreement higher for the enemy. Applying the military instrument to the enemy's strategic vulnerabilities (whether that be the military, government or people) does little to successfully influence war termination if the relative costs to

the enemy do not exceed the relative costs to the United States. The number of casualties in the Vietnam War provides an example. During this war, the number of casualties suffered during operational campaigns was much higher for the North Vietnamese than for the United States. However, due to the difference in culture and governmental structure, the relative cost of continued disagreement was, in fact, higher for the United States since American public opinion was reluctant to accept any casualties in a war with ill-defined objectives.<sup>25</sup>

The second factor is that operational objectives should increase the enemy's deprivation costs of continuing military activity; in essence, the military instrument should be applied to deprive the enemy of something of value (such as land, POWs, domestic economic capacity, ability to trade, etc.). The leveraging of deprivation costs is particularly useful when the political objective is not itself subject to military action (such as influencing the political or military behavior of the enemy). In essence, a deprivation cost entails the capture (or the potential future destruction) of bargaining chips which can then be used during negotiations to obtain concessions.<sup>26</sup>

A third factor that should be considered when developing operational objectives is the threat of escalation. In essence, military actions can be used to demonstrate that a higher level of violence is possible if political concessions are not made. Credibility (the ability and will to inflict a higher level of violence) is a major issue when threatening escalation.



Consequently, in order to communicate a credible threat of escalation, a military action to demonstrate the ability and willingness to employ the escalated activity is generally needed (this initial action would preferably be similar to, but on a smaller scale, than the action threatened by escalation).<sup>27</sup>

A fourth factor is the desirability to demonstrate determination...the design of military activity to make the United States appear strong, confident, and willing to continue the war until political objectives are obtained. Through determination, the military instrument can convey the impression that the political goals are valued so highly that the United States is committed to the war effort and, ultimately, that time is not on the enemy's side. Consequently, the enemy should be much more amenable to negotiation and compromise.<sup>28</sup>

The final factor to be considered when developing operational objectives is the protection of the Clausewitzian Triangle within the United States. As noted, public support in the United States will gradually erode during a limited war. Consequently, if possible, the military instrument must be applied to quickly leverage the political position of the United States and, ultimately, to coerce the enemy to moderate political goals.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, operational objectives should be designed to significantly degrade the enemy's cost/benefit ratio of continuing a limited war through aggressively attacking the most prominent strategic vulnerability in his Clausewitzian Triangle

(which may not be his army). In addition, the operational commander must protect his own Clausewitzian Triangle through minimizing the time involved in the military campaign and by keeping his own relative costs well below the relative costs of the enemy. Finally, the operational commander must convey the perception that the enemy will be the recipient of additional adverse consequences resulting from future military activity (and perhaps even more severe damage due to escalation) by conveying a sense of resolve throughout the military campaign.

These practical concepts present a framework that will focus military activity on enemy vulnerabilities; negotiations and an alteration of the enemy's behavior and/or political objectives should result. In addition, the noted concepts should prevent military activity from becoming focused solely on the enemy's army...a tendency that can lead to a loss of perspective regarding the ultimate political objective.

**CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION/REVIEW:** Once fighting begins, there are several factors that the operational commander must consider to ensure that the bridge between the strategic and operational levels of war is maintained. First, continuous communication with political leaders to ensure that political goals have not been altered is critical. As noted, political goals in limited wars can be subject to alteration as battlefield activity creates euphoria or an erosion of your own Triangle (which can respectively lead to an expansion or contraction of

political goals). If this occurs, military objectives will likely have to be altered to achieve congruence with the revised political object.

Second, the operational commander must ensure that there is a strong degree of coordination between diplomatic (which, given the nature of limited war, will begin while fighting is ongoing) and military activity. For instance, during critical stages of negotiations the military instrument can be used to signal a clear sense of determination (by threatening escalation) which may induce the enemy to accede to current political demands; or, conversely, if a negotiated settlement is imminent, it may be prudent to avoid military actions that may communicate an unwillingness to settle.<sup>30</sup>

Third, the operational commander must remember that military activity will ultimately be driven by an assessment of potential benefits and costs, as measured by the political and people legs of his own Triangle. Consequently, the operational commander must constantly revisit the potential political benefits of a particular military objective versus the relative costs necessary to achieve that objective. To lose sight of this algorithm will significantly weaken the political benefit (the ultimate goal) of the military campaign.

Finally, the operational commander must continually ensure that a termination strategy guides his operational objectives. To do otherwise reduces the military effort to an end in itself...the ultimate mistake in a limited war.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**THE KOREAN WAR:**  
**A CASE STUDY OF WAR TERMINATION**

An examination of the Korean War will prove helpful in determining the applicability of the practical steps regarding war termination offered in this paper.

**STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT/OBJECTIVES:** As discussed in chapter 5, an adequate strategic assessment, followed by the establishment of reasonable strategic objectives, is necessary to determine if the military instrument can achieve the political objective (the assessment), and then to focus the military instrument on the principal strategic vulnerability of the enemy (the strategic objective). During the Korean War, this did not occur.

This paper proposes that the initial strategic steps necessary to successfully apply the military instrument require a clear understanding of the political objective by the operational commander followed by a determination as to whether military force can be reasonably used to achieve that objective. During the Korean War, the political objective changed several times (from status quo ante bellum to reunification to status quo ante bellum), thus making it extremely difficult for the operational commander to recognize the ultimate political object.<sup>31</sup> This confusion is best communicated by MacArthur who said "my whole effort...has been to get some definition...of what I should do."<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, an assessment of what the military instrument could reasonably achieve could not be conducted.

In light of the above, the destruction of the North Korean army (and later the Chinese army) became an end in itself rather than a means to achieve a political end. The destruction of the enemy's army was a valid strategic objective while fighting occurred in South Korean territory (given the initial political goal of status quo ante bellum). However, after Inchon, the pursuit and destruction of the enemy's army north of the 38th parallel lead to a change in the political objective to reunification. This occurrence (the military instrument driving a change in the political object) is contrary to the proposed concept of adjusting military activity (the means) to achieve a political object (the end).<sup>33</sup>

Since a clear political objective (with supportive strategic military objectives) was not developed, the shape of the post-war environment became contentious. In essence, MacArthur envisioned a post-war environment in which the threat of Communist China would be eliminated (or greatly diminished) while President Truman was unwilling to risk an unlimited war with China. This disagreement ultimately lead to MacArthur's removal.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, a strategic assessment of the vulnerability of the Triangle within the United States for alternative political/military objectives was not conducted. The lack of this analysis exposed the people leg of the Triangle to manipulation when political objectives were expanded to include

reunification (which resulted in a wider, more costly war).

**OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES:** In addition to the divergence with the recommended concepts at the strategic level, significant dichotomies also existed relative to the proposals for establishing operational objectives.

This paper proposes that operational objectives should be designed to increase the relative costs of disagreement and/or deprivation for the enemy. In Korea, neither of these proposals was followed. Given the difference in governmental structure (a democracy with a free press vs. an authoritarian regime), the relative cost of disagreement of continued war was higher for the United States relative to the communists; the value of human life was simply discounted in the communist regimes who could control public dissent through internal repression. In addition, by neglecting to include the capture of North Korean territory north of the 38th parallel, operational objectives failed to provide the leverage (bargaining chip) that could have possibly coerced the communists into a more timely peace.<sup>35</sup>

This paper also proposes that operational objectives should communicate the will to inflict additional violence/damage to the enemy by demonstrating determination and/or threatening escalation in order to shape the enemy's perception of the future. By ceasing offensive operations at the 38th parallel in June 1951, the United States negated the threat of future adverse consequences for the enemy, and thus placed time on the side of

the communists during the resultant war of attrition.<sup>36</sup>

The final proposal made regarding operational objectives is that military force should be used to quickly coerce the enemy to negotiate/moderate political goals in order to protect the people element of the United States' Triangle. Unfortunately, this proposal was overlooked when offensive military operations were halted at the 38th parallel with the resultant impact being a severe erosion of support for the war in the United States; the UN negotiating position was consequently weakened as public pressure demanded a timely end to the fighting.

In sum, the Korean experience is an example of the difficulties that can arise in successfully terminating a limited war if the theory and practical proposals offered by this paper are disregarded. In essence, operational art (at the strategic/operational level) was misapplied in Korea resulting in both a lack of strategic focus for the military instrument (what was the political object and could the military instrument achieve it) and also a lack of operational leverage (how could the enemy be coerced into moderating behavior and/or political objectives in a timely manner). Consequently, it is no surprise that public support for the war eroded as negotiations languished for approximately 2 years after the territory to achieve the status quo ante bellum had been recaptured in June 1951.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper provides arguments to support the thesis that the effective application of operational art is critical to successful war termination in a limited war. Given the arguments provided, I believe it is clear that the operational commander is uniquely positioned to serve as an objective (outside the beltway) review regarding the appropriateness of the military instrument to the issue at hand, and then to apply that instrument as a coercive lever to change the enemy's behavior and/or political goals.

An understanding of war termination and negotiating theory is essential to the effective application of operational art since these theories provide applicable background data on the political impact that can be achieved through military force. These theories, together with the practical framework developed in this paper, should clearly enhance the ability of the operational commander to bridge the strategic and operational levels of war in order to achieve war termination on favorable terms. In light of that benefit, I recommend that the theory and practicalities provided in this paper serve as a framework for an expanded discussion in current doctrine regarding use of the military instrument to achieve successful war termination in a limited war...after all, the achievement of the political object is why we ultimately fight.



## ENDNOTES

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